

Fishman Rare Earth humbucker & single-coil pickups **£179 & £149**

An industry standard soundhole pickup gets an upgrade and makeover for 2008. We take a listen... *by Dave Burrluck*

When a company claims that one of its products is “the world’s most popular”, we often wonder if it’s just marketing hyperbole. In the case of Fishman’s Rare Earth, however, we’re not surprised in the least. This now 10-year-old pickup has seen good service on many of the Guitarist team’s – past and present – acoustics, not to mention those of players of all ages and abilities worldwide.

Originally designed by the UK’s Mike Vanden as the Mimesis, Larry Fishman heard it and liked it enough, not to buy the company, but the rights to produce it as the Rare Earth. “As soon as I heard the pickup I knew he had something good,” remembers Larry Fishman. “We have a great relationship with Mike and he’s stayed very involved with the development of the magnetic pickups. The Rare Earth is a great solution: it’s got individual neodymium magnets under each string, onboard buffer, class A preamp, and is powered by 3V worth of calculator battery.”

For 2008 both the humbucker and single-coil Rare Earth pickups have been subtly upgraded. The new pickups look very similar, although the plastic

casing is now slightly curved on the outer edge as opposed to the parallel bar shape of the previous models. The new pickups are slightly deeper, too, and instead of the treble lift switch, the humbucker now has a rotary control on its underside for volume – easily accessed through the soundhole when the pickup is fitted. Fishman also states that battery life has been extended to 300 hours and, as ever, temporary fitting is dead easy. Permanent installation is not difficult but get help if you don’t know how to fit an endpin jack.

Sounds

Fishman says that the pickups have been re-voiced and fine-tuned “to offer an even smoother treble response than their popular, category-defining predecessors.” Okay, this writer has had an original stacked-coil Rare Earth humbucker installed on a high-end Tacoma dreadnought for the best part of a decade so it should be easy to hear. And while the guitar has taken a fair bit of battering, the Rare Earth has always delivered its signature strong-but-smooth voice with an electric-like undertow mixed with crisp but not harsh highs. It takes EQ’ing well and if you’re chasing a more scooped mid sound it’s easy to dial in. Overall it’s highly reliable, lacks any piezo-like brittle ‘ping’ and excels for bluesy, older acoustic styles and slide.

The new humbucker matches the even string-to-string balance and, initially at least, overall tonality. It’s slightly lower in output (minimal) and listening closely we’d say there seems to be a little more transparency to the sound. There’s still that electric-like character as you move up the fingerboard, there’s a soupcon more clarity perhaps, and that

onboard volume control is actually very handy. If the differences are fairly minor, swapping to the single-coil Rare Earth produces a much more distinct difference with more zing and less smoothness. That said it does pick up hum, which depending on your environment could be the deal breaker – good detailed and lively sound though.

Verdict

It’s doubtful unless you’re a really picky audiophile that you’d want to rush out and buy a new Rare Earth to replace your old one. Yes, there is a difference but it’s really quite subtle and in general gigging environments with other musicians and audience noise you’d be hard pushed to tell. However, if you’ve not yet experienced the Rare Earth we’d recommend the humbucker as an all-round gigging pickup. It’s a smoother sound compared to the lively single-coil, but unless you’re away from hum sources like mains transformers you will experience hum-pick up with the single-coil.

The Rare Earth still has a place turning a pure acoustic into a performance electro with the minimum of fuss, and also replacing a cheap and nasty (and invariably unnaturally crisp) factory-fitted piezo system with some real tonal class. **G**

The bottom line

We like: Easy to install; natural acoustic-like sound

We dislike: Potential hum pick-up on the single-coil and both sound different to an under-saddle piezo

Guitarist says: Idiot-proof soundhole pickup that provides detailed and natural acoustic-like tone without piezo zing.

The Rivals

LR Baggs’s M1 soundhole pickup is available in both passive and active modes (£149 & £189), a humbucking stack-coil design that offers adjustable pole pieces and is powered by a 3V lithium battery giving you “over 1,000 hours” of use. **Shadow’s NanoMAG** (£159, inc NanoMAG pickup and under-soundboard preamp) is a very small active pickup that attaches to the end of your fingerboard and can be used with various Shadow preamps – very discrete. **Takamine’s Tri-Ax** (£119) was designed in conjunction with LR Baggs so it’s very similar to the M1 but can be used as a system (£FOA) with Takamine’s CTP-1 ‘Cool Tube’ preamp.



Fishman Rare Earth

PRICE: Humbucker, £179
Single-coil, £149

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Active magnetic soundhole pickup with fixed trailing lead and endpin socket

DIMENSIONS: 16.7 (w) x 101 (l) x 44mm (d)

CABLE LENGTH (m/ft): Approx 1.8/5.9

POWER: Two 1.5V silver oxide or single 3V lithium; approx 300 hours continuous use

RANGE OPTIONS: The Rare Earth Blend (£299) adds a goose-neck electret hypercardioid mic and blend control to the humbucker (old-style). Two passive NeoD soundhole pickups are available: the single-coil (£49) and humbucker (£79)

Sound Technology 01462 480000
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Test results

Build quality ★★★★★
Features ★★★★★
Sound ★★★★★
Value for money ★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



The plastic casing is now slightly curved